

MAKING A PLACE: ART, WRITING, AND A MORE–THAN–TEXTUAL APPROACH

AMANDA THOMSON[†]

In this article I discuss both a process of making artwork about a particular landscape—the forests in parts of the north of Scotland—and an arts practice that has expanded to include ethnographic fieldwork. Not only have I shadowed foresters, ecologists, and other people who work in these outdoor spaces, I have actually performed tasks with them. My work is concerned with the familiarization of place that can come through repeated visits, processes of coming to know, and exploring how others' knowledge can be brought to bear on process, practice, and outcome. In the following description and discussion of some of my work, I explore the ways in which the concerns and interests of my practice-based research may sometimes overlap with the concerns and interests of geographical inquiry.



FIG. 1—"Treescape, Abernethy." Digital print.

I am interested in how the "more than written" (and, perhaps, the "other-than, or not-quite, explained") can add value to investigations of place and how the kind of writings on landscape and place that Hayden Lorimer described as "more-than-representational"—the "diverse work that seeks better to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds" (2005, 83)—can add texture, depth, and context to an arts practice. In doing so, I draw on writers such as J.-D. Dewsbury and his coauthors, who argued for "accounts that leave a space for something else to happen" (2002, 439), and John Wylie, who wrote about how "forms of narrative—memoir, montage, travelogue, ethnography—are being used both within and beyond academia as creative and critical means of expressing post-humanist philosophies of place" (2005, 237). More recently, Wylie has claimed that there exists "a desire for different types of writing, methods, formats and 'outputs,' and a shared stress also on the affective, emotive and praxis based aspects of life" (2010, 213).

[†] All of the images in this article were created by the author.

✉ Ms. THOMSON is a doctoral candidate in interdisciplinary fine art practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness IV3 5SQ, Scotland; [www.artt@passingplace.com].

My interest is in how theoretical writings, my own narratives, and the narratives of people I encounter and walk with in these places intertwine and influence the process of art-making, which itself contributes to understandings of place. The work I go on to discuss has evolved through being in and passing through places, journeying, resting, and revisiting, sometimes alone and sometimes with others. Whereas Rebecca Solnit likened a journey to something that unfolds rather like a story does (2001, 72), Doreen Massey asserted that space could be seen as a “series of interrelationships” and that “perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (2005, 12). I am interested in weaving the interconnections between lines of walking, discovery, making, stories of place, and in creating paths of narrative, with and beyond text.

In this article, “lightly flecked with insights from theory” (Lorimer, in Peter Merriman and others 2008, 197), I reflect on some of the different iterations of my arts practice before focusing on a series of works more directly evolving from a fieldwork practice that entails more deeply rooted and task-based immersions in place. I also discuss the role that the line of a walk has come to play in this work.

As an artist-researcher, my engagement with landscape has sometimes involved standing back, looking upon, recording, and extrapolating. At other times—particularly during the fieldwork that has come to be part of my work—it has come also to include immersion and performing tasks within the landscape. The works I have created about these places include: two-dimensional photographs, drawings, and etchings; pieces that are potentially more immersive (video, sound, and installation); interactive pieces such as bookworks; and explorations with the essay form.



FIG. 2—“Dead among the Living: Fieldnotes.” Bookwork: etchings and digital-print concertina book.

Intrinsic to the scope of these enquiries is an openness to the world, to the place as it appears—or becomes apparent. Beth Greenhough understands that geographies take into account the fact that “the world does not wait passively to be enlivened, but is already lively, active and capable of intruding upon us” (2010, 41). This seems to me to be an important way in which work comes to be made: One pays attention to situations that arise, perhaps as the landscape reveals itself, by being in a particular place at a particular time. Sometimes what is revealed comes through a task or what others have pointed out.

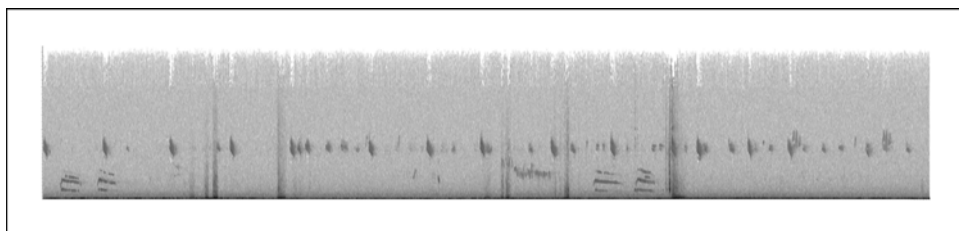


FIG. 3—"On the Wing." Digital print.

Some of the artwork I make may intersect readily with geographical concerns, and I will go on to discuss mappings that have come through task-based walks through place. Other artwork may feel only tangentially related, exploring more abstract explorations of place. A recording that started as part of a "still-life" series of soundworks as the various sites of my fieldwork began as a breezy day in the woods, with a willow warbler singing and a blackbird's song coming in. A helicopter "disrupted" the recording as it flew overhead—although later, when I relistened to the recording, I found that the birdsong had not been interrupted at all. I realized that the noise of the helicopter, together with that of jet planes, was something of a sound signature in this forest, which is close to an active Air Force base. This awareness evolved into a series of prints made from recordings of place (such as "On the Wing," above), using spectrographs to capture sound histories, as well as a dialogue and project with a scientist and another artist/philosopher about the nature of sound and space and how space/place can be (differently) represented. Sounds become marks, and the marks straddle a tension between the representational and the abstract, between a temporality and a fixed point in time. Sounds become reified; a unique moment in a place's sound history has been freeze-framed and another pulse of place articulated.



FIG. 4—"Sometimes All There Is to Movement is Shadow and Light." Videowork (still shot).

A silent, meditative, two-channel video piece entitled "Sometimes All There Is to Movement Is Shadow and Light" came into being because I happened to be in a forest on a breezy day with sunshine and clouds. The work quietly reveals the movement that comes even in our stillness and how it is that, when we become still, sometimes otherworldly movements come to our attention.



FIG. 5—"A Bridal o'Crows." Video installation.

Indeed, the significance of stillness, in (and to) watching and listening (and learning), is an integral element of my explorations. In a solo show entitled "Several Forests," a video of crows flying overhead was projected onto the ceiling, causing people to stop and look up, momentarily thinking that it had a skylight. Art and other disciplines can thus draw attention to a particular aspect of the world and give the viewers, the audience, space in which to pause and reflect. In doing so, viewers may (re)discover elements of the world for themselves.

An element of my research has been to shadow rangers and ecologists as they have gone about their work. Tim Edensor has discussed how, in the past few centuries, the practice of walking has become, for the most part, a leisure activity (2000, 2010). However, in learning about places, their ecology, and their management, I have become interested in the task-oriented walking that is an everyday part of the workday for people like rangers and ecologists, foresters and deer stalkers. By walking with such people as they go about specific tasks, and by sometimes participating in such tasks as counting seedlings, stalking deer, burning muir (moorlands), or removing "exotics" (species, such as Sitka spruce, that are not native to Scots pine-woods), a space is opened for the land itself. The tasks undertaken become active participants in our conversations, my learning about these places, and the work done in them. Some tasks are only carried out at specific times of the year, so a place can open itself up to different types of interactions depending on the time of year, and different aspects of place are brought to the fore at different times. Furthermore, many of tasks require systematic movements across particular areas, whereas others necessitate specific, concentrated actions at particular points. All involve acute, experienced, and concentrated ways of engaging with the environment.

On a cold, snowy February day I walked the pinewoods and moorlands in an area of Speyside with an ecologist who was conducting research on the numbers and distribution of crossbills, a kind of finch. Three kinds of crossbills are found there, and research has shown that the Scottish crossbill is a separate species from parrot and common crossbills. The Scottish crossbill is now thought to be Britain's only endemic bird. The actual physical differences of these crossbills are too nuanced to definitively differentiate in the field, but Scottish crossbills have been found to have a distinct call, which can be identified using sonograms.

We walked out on the kind of day where the clouds above were laden, and it always seemed brighter at the horizon. Waves of snow peeled across the land, but never so thick that the mountains beyond were lost.

Unlike walking for leisure, our stops were prescribed by preplotted coordinates set by the lead researcher. The ecologist made decisions about how to group these points into manageable days and how to get to each point. When I accompanied her, we covered five points each day. Task-defined walking like this requires time to stop and listen. On arriving at each point, the ecologist set up the equipment, and we would stop, and listen, looking upward and scanning the treetops for movements and more attentively listening for the faintest sounds of birds.

The air was raw, and the cold seeped into our bones through thick soles and socks as we stood, waiting. After recording the numbers and sexes of any birds that flew in, we packed up and moved on to the next point.

In walking, even before one arrives at one's destination, one can have an expectation about habitat and environment, sometimes from having been in a place before, sometimes after a quick scan of a map beforehand to see the relative steepness or flatness of the terrain or whether you will be passing through open or forested land. Nonetheless, it is impossible to know the nuances of place and what you will see and be surrounded by from simply looking at a 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey Landranger map. On this crossbill survey, each point we reached was subtly different: sometimes hillier, sometimes with views across the strath, sometimes in the middle of old woods and at other times on their fringes. In one remote area, the undergrowth was very different from that in the woodlands, which had recently been intensively managed to encourage capercaillies (a species on the "red" endangered list) to breed, and these remoter places were overgrazed still, by deer and sheep. In this area the trees had space to breathe, and there were old granny pines, laden with snow, and branches snapped by the snow's weight of snow, as well as many snags—standing deadwood—in various states of decay. Here, three crossbills were lured in—a pair and a single female. As we crossed an area to get from one lot of pinewoods to another we encountered another landscape entirely: more open, eerie—dead pines on a flat river valley we were crossing. In front of us stood a group of taller standing deadwood and, beyond them, bog pines; small and stunted, like supersized bonsai. This bog-pine deadwood was pale gray and spindly, with branches at odd angles like broken arms: the skeletal remains, the bare bones.

Although the landscape itself felt so still, and for the most part bereft of wildlife, what the snow gave us were traces of what had gone before; the tracks imprinted in the snow; paths and signs that otherwise would be invisible. In this walk, I learned more about the breadth of knowledge, born of having worked in these places, that the ecologist I was with has. She pointed out the imprints of fox and weasel, red deer, pine marten, signs of water voles, and the place where a golden eagle was known to have its earie. In another area, on the edge of forest and moor, we caught the musky scent of a fox before we saw its tracks, and once, the imprints of a black grouse, a clear line of its steps then nothing but two faint arcs in the snow, a last connection of feather to ground.

Still, after that walk, beyond such description, I did not know what art/work would come out of the experience, but, on reflection, it was these strange, otherworldly bog-pines that stuck in my mind, whose form I wanted to bring to attention by making work about them; and out of that day three large etchings, the “Abernethy Suite,” emerged.



FIG. 6—“Abernethy Suite II.” Etching, 65 × 90 centimeters.

Although I originally used a handheld GPS device for a discrete art project about deadwood in a Scots pinewood (Thomson 2012), it has gradually evolved to become an important facet of my ethnographic fieldwork. From its earliest use in fieldwork, such as on the walk described above, it has impacted my writing and become the basis for a new series of prints.



FIG. 7—"Crossbill Survey / Bog Pines, Abernethy." Composite image: GPS drawing and photograph.

Phil Jones and his coauthors, in an article entitled "Exploring Space and Place with Walking Interviews," notes that "there has also been a somewhat curious lack of work attempting to more directly connect *what* people say with *where* they say it" (2008, 150; italics in the original). In relation to the walk I described above, the GPS tells us nothing of the cold winteriness of that walk or the specificities of the habitat or our conversations, but, from a position of being led, as opposed to knowing where I am going, the GPS helps me spatialize my routes and helps me make sense of where I have been. In conjunction with the notes and transcriptions, photographs, and recordings I made, the GPS track further assists me in gaining a sense of how I have moved through these places.

The paths tracked by the GPS form digitally created drawings of the places we were and shows particular movements determined by the tasks we were undertaking. I have already described the ways of walking that crossbill counting necessitates—where steady walking is punctuated by fifteen-minute periods of stillness, and intense watching and listening, looking upward for signs of crossbills coming in. Activities such as the removal of exotics usually involves a group of people in walking through a particular area of Scots pinewood—often in lines, sometimes along paths—and removing any errant spruce trees they find.

I recently started a series of work in which I consciously take advantage of this method of track-making. Loosely gathered under the umbrella notion of walking as mark-making, and consisting of the series of drawings made using a GPS, these "works" are providing a link between ethnographic field-work, the process of making, and the process of research "in the field." The lines that these GPS tracks create reveal the very particular ways in which different tasks require

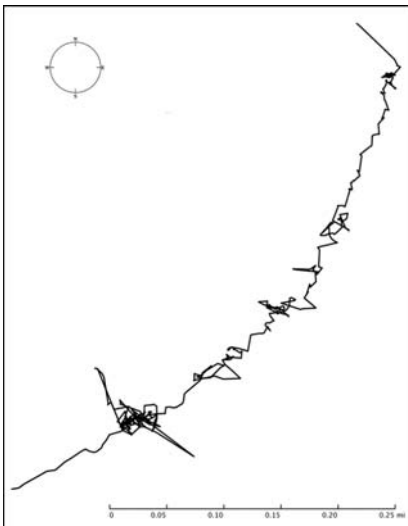


FIG. 8—"Tree Removal, Trackside, Abernethy." GPS drawing.

us to move through the land in different ways. These first iterations started out as embossments but have become etchings. Although in themselves they are quite clean, they yield minimal information; they become, in these iterations, line drawings, though perhaps, given the information gathered in the course of performing these tasks, they will evolve into bookworks consisting of both image and text.

Walking with an ecologist as she counted regeneration in an area of moorland and pinewood involved moving in single file along east-west transects and concentrating as the ecologist counted, gauged, and noted the age of each young tree we passed. In the drawing made by that walk, I see not just the careful lines we walked but also where, boots off, we crossed a river to another, longer transect and where we detoured to cross a weir across a smaller, deeper river before returning to the transect we were walking.

“Regeneration, Abernethy” shows only one day’s walking in the context of a section of an Ordnance Survey map lined with the transects the ecologist had to walk in the course of the survey. In the etching to the right, these transects become a drawing more than a cartographically descriptive image that would come with the track transposed onto Google Earth. Still, there is scope for both iterations, and each works in different ways.

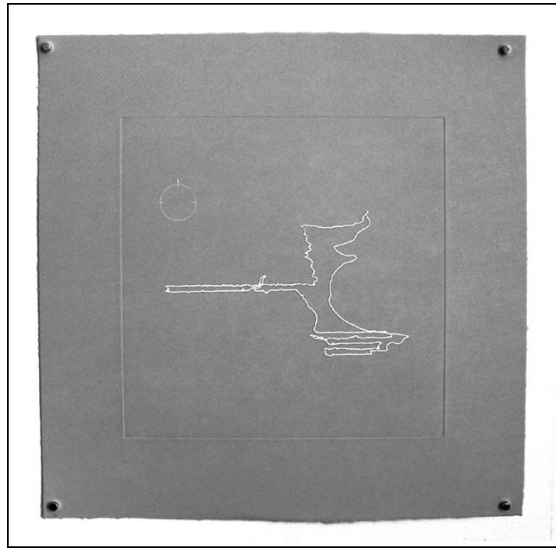


FIG. 9—“Regeneration, Abernethy.” Etching.

In a Deeside glen I accompanied an ecologist looking for regeneration—seedlings such as those of the Scots pine, birch, juniper, and rowan—in among the moorland and pinewoods of the glen. We spent the first day in open moorland, coming off a hill at dusk to stay overnight in a bothy (an empty cottage on the estate). In the morning we began again in a wooded part of the glen before finishing back on moorland, on the other side of the hill where we had been the evening before. The GPS tracks showed fairly linear movements across the hillsides, punctuated with quite oddly concentrated movements at certain points. At a predefined spot we would stop; the ecologist would mark the center point and measure from it two 12-meter-long lines perpendicular from each other. These formed a quarter of a circle that we searched for signs of new growth—seedlings as small as 10 centimeters in height. Then the other three quadrants would be measured out and combed in the same way. Once this was completed the ecologist measured a line due north from the center of the circle and walked along it, looking a meter on each side for signs of animal scat.



FIG. 10—"Regeneration Counting, Deeside." Track in Google Earth.

The GPS drawings thus reveal different characteristics of different tasks. Some, as in the task above, show interruptions, where, perhaps, in the course of walking another activity has taken place. Some walks are much more obviously observational and steadily paced: continual, nuanced looking, jumping from the short distance to long distance and back. For example, on a walk through a woodland with a conservation worker, checking a site before a harvesting operation began, we looked for signs of badgers, ant nests, and raptor nests; we looked for rare flowers such as the one-flowered wintergreen, for juniper bushes, and for any signs of an old settlement, shown on maps that predate the planted forest.

In deer stalking we looked for sudden movements and the glimpse of a deer's rust-colored back in the middle of pinewoods or purple heather. Our direction could change depending on the direction of the wind, or abruptly reach its distance (and its point), if a deer was shot. Then we might have to clamber down to the carcass, and the stalker would *gralloch* (disembowel) it before carrying it directly back to the truck. These GPS-made lines will never capture the awe, or the cold, or, indeed, the emotion—that I still cannot fully articulate—I felt the first time I saw a deer that had been shot. Nor will they reveal how we look, or the various ways in which we must listen, or the different paces and lengths of time different tasks take: They are certainly limited in the amount of information they can provide, but in conjunction with writing, bookworks, video and soundworks, and the other forms of art I make, they play an important part in my understandings of place, task, and where I have been led.

Jo Vergunst argues that, “for ethnographers, turning too readily to high technology has the danger that we actually distance ourselves from the experience of movement, in the very act of getting closer to it” (2011, 210). But these GPS tracks—automatically produced—allow a revisioning of the places I have been and a contextualization of a time span marked by placing one foot in front of the other when the nature of our task leads us to create linear paths somewhat akin to pencil lines on a page. And the etchings, deeply embossed, reveal the simplicity of a line produced by very complex, sometimes quite arduous movements through place. Emma Dexter, drawing on Norman Bryson’s reflections on drawing, said, “As a pencil moves about the paper, its path is local and confined; freed from the need to consider the totality, it can respond immediately to ‘where the hand is now in praesentia’” (2005, 6). When Dexter described the way a pencil moves across a page, she could have been writing about our physical movements as we covered ground step by step. She could also portraying how, as we walked, our vision, our ears, our other senses took in the larger environment, our physical path was constrained by our bodily movements, and, sometimes because of the tasks at hand, our eyes had to concentrate on the ground immediately in front of us in order to spot seedlings or particular kinds of flowers. At other times our vision had to be expansive, taking in the whole of the landscape before us, seeking signs of movement that might indicate a deer, or upward and above the tree line or horizon if we were looking for birds. Sometimes, such as in brood counting, it was our own movements through space that created the change we wanted, as we walked in lines, trying to flush out any capercaillie hiding in the undergrowth so we could count. Sometimes the lines of a transect were disrupted by a natural barrier—a river perhaps, or a clump of junipers too impenetrable to walk through. And occasionally these lines—rather like life itself—were disrupted; sometimes the woodland was so dense that the signal from satellite to GPS was momentarily lost, or its accuracy deteriorated. Human error occasionally came into play, too, when one of us pressed a wrong button or we let our batteries die. Sometimes, however, although the lines appeared to be continuous, our memory failed and eventually caused disruption.

Tim Ingold contended that “life is lived . . . along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort. It is along paths, too, that people grow into a knowledge

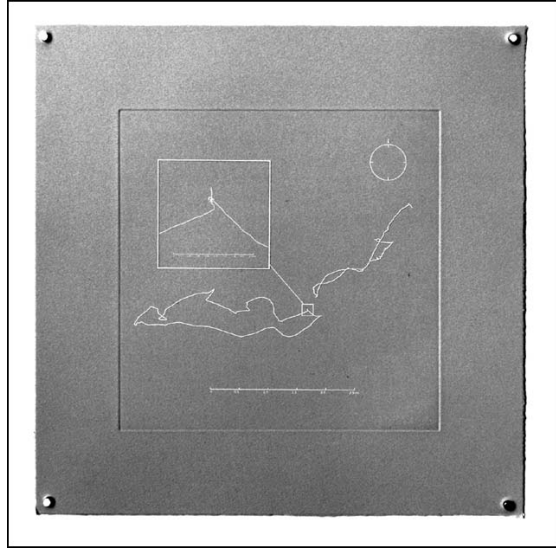


FIG. 11—"Regeneration, Deeside." Etching.

of the world around them, and describe this world in the stories they tell" (2007, 2). In these prints, these (drawn) lines contain within their simplicity knowledge born of movement through, tasks performed, and conversations had. Although the prints lose the dynamism of movement in the sense that their imprints are reified and complete, the temporalities of our movements, as I return time and again to place, are inherent when, with one trace superimposed on another, my paths cross. These GPS drawings help me make sense of where I have been and, occasionally, what was said, where. From these panoptic renderings I change perspective, using memory, notes, photographs, and sometimes audio records to shift downward and be within and among, looking along and out from, again.

In such ways the use of a GPS straddles concerns that are both artistic and geographical. Here I utilize the electronically produced data collected from the physical processes of a walking ethnographic approach to create another element in my work. The lines made by walking and task, as well as the prints that have emerged from the GPS-generated tracks, form another strand to my arts practice and in the ways in which I articulate place, moments of places, and different impressions of place that are sometimes abstract, sometimes representational, and sometimes, depending on how they contextualized with other elements of the work, can sit someplace in between. These iterations are sometimes written, sometimes image based, and their elements may find expression in print and bookworks, video, sound, or sculpture.

Different iterations are indicative of diverse encounters, experiences, and interactions with places and people. Each shows a way of approaching art-making that is not deliberately geographical in approach but that constitutes an approach to art-making that happens to intersect with geographical concerns. The results are explorations that incorporate the physical materiality of a walking ethnographic approach into outputs that may be considered both geographical and artistic. The lines walked become both traces and threads woven through particular places, lines of movement that are never erased but reveal backtracks, wrong turnings, and lines crossed where we sometimes had to retrace our steps.

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